

The Capital Wit Of Art Buchwald

Whenever I get tired writing about politics," the column began, "I like to write a cowboy script. I've been working on one lately about Lyndon Baines, the famous mayor of Great Bird Falls." The script charted a somehow familiar crisis. The Shawnees are fighting the Blackfeet and the Blackfeet are being led, some say, by Apaches. Mayor Baines sends a cavalry colonel to investigate. His report: "Can't tell the good Indians from the bad Indians. Please send instructions."

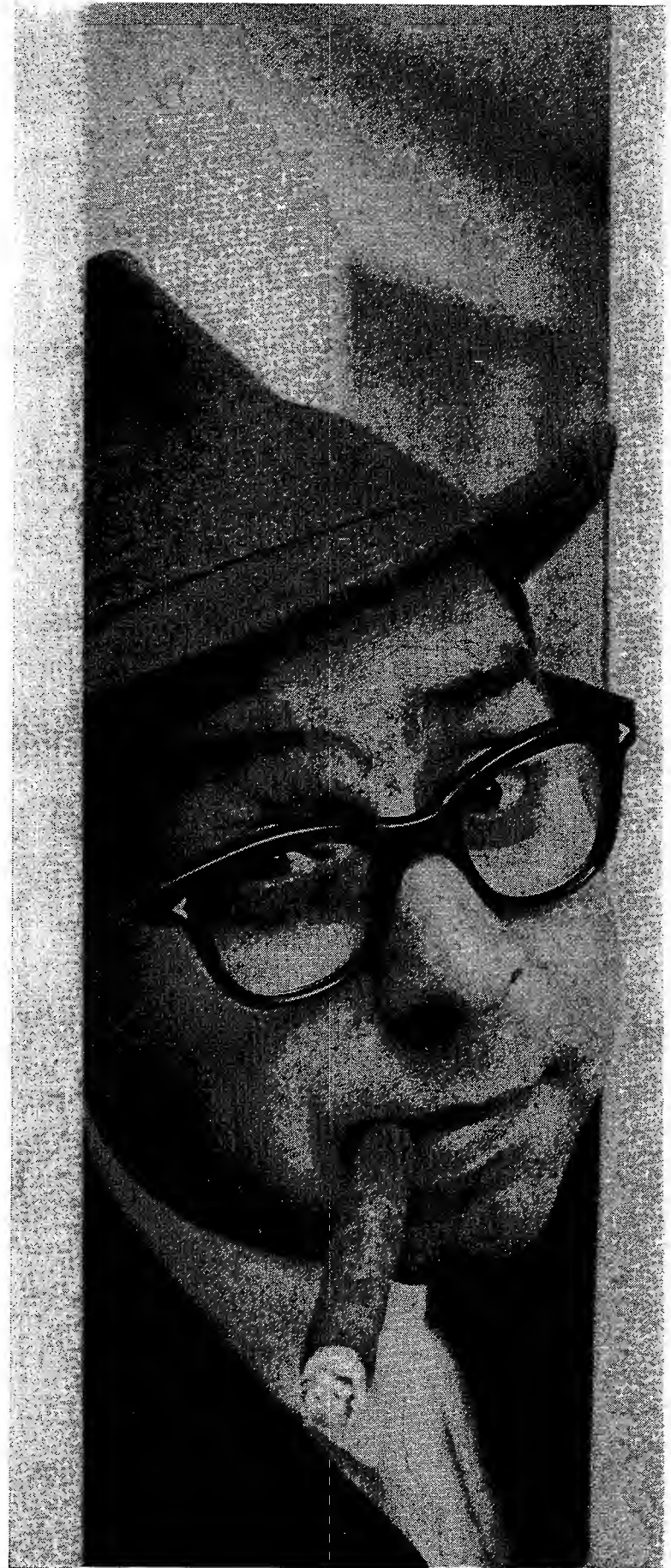
In two quick sentences, the Dominican crisis was wrapped up and Art Buchwald had once again harpooned the heart of U.S. policy. In the two and a half years since the roly-poly columnist moved, tongue in cheek, to Washington, he has become, quite simply, the funniest U.S. newspaper columnist published today and one of the nation's sharpest political satirists. "He's our court jester in residence," says Special Presidential Assistant Bill D. Moyers. "He's one of the best satirists of our time," says Walter Lippmann. And no less a furrowed-brow than Arthur Krock, *The New York Times'* political columnist, claims Buchwald is "as capable of classical political satire as anyone now writing. His 'President Goldwater' column (page 48) was at the level of Trollope at his best." Hyperbole, of course, will get Krock nowhere. "There are only four of us writing humor from Washington these days," says Buchwald. "Drew Pearson, David Lawrence, Arthur Krock and myself."

Apparently, the praise stops at the President's desk in the White House. President Johnson, whose thin skin is regularly pierced by the Buchwald lance, refuses to discuss the columnist. Does LBJ read him? "Some of my inside sources at the White House tell me that President Johnson reads me and chuckles," says Buchwald. "Other equally informed sources tell me that LBJ does not read me. I suspect the truth lies somewhere in between; he reads me but does not chuckle."

Skeptic: Buchwald's gleeful goading of the President puts him squarely in the tradition of the nation's great newspaper satirists—and, if Mr. Johnson also follows precedent, he probably checks Buchwald as regularly as he does the AP and UPI machines he had installed in his Oval office. Lincoln read the dialect barbs of Artemus Ward aloud to friends; Finley Peter Dunne's eternal skeptic, Mr. Dooley, was followed by Theodore Roosevelt, who reportedly toned down his repressive Philippine policy because of Dunne's attacks, and the cowboy wisdom of Will Rogers often delighted the patrician Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Buchwald borrows from this tradition, but his style shows other influences as well. He can be the schlemiel, victimized by wife, mother-in-law and an indifferent society. What happens when he buys a sporty new car touted to make the girls beat down the windshield to get at him? As Buchwald tells it, a gorgeous girl breathlessly rushes up to him, eyes his insolent chariot and then asks if he will move so her husband can park. He can be the college humor-magazine editor, populating his wild world with Prof. Max Kilaton, the hawkish nuclear scientist, and Gen. El Finco, the Caribbean strong man. But most often he is the elaborately naïve analyst who takes the complex woes of the world and reduces them to their logical absurdities—as when he has LBJ alert two airborne divisions, four Marine brigades and the Atlantic Fleet before proclaiming Mother's Day.

In his later years, an embittered James Thurber said it was



The columnist: Under the props, an angry man

hard to sustain humor "in a period when mankind seems to be trying, on the one hand, to invent a pill or miracle drug that will cure us all of everything and, on the other hand, to invent a machine for instant annihilation." And, indeed, as the world daily becomes grimmer and grimmer, newspapers find it hard to keep a sense of humor. "Papers in general suffer from a lack of humor," says Larry Fanning, executive editor of The Chicago Daily News. "In the days of personal journalism, humor and satire were a principal piece of the artillery a newspaper used." In the last decade, satire has proliferated in nightclubs and on television (Mort Sahl, Nichols and May, Dick Gregory, "That Was the Week That Was") and in far-out magazines like *Mad*, *Monocle* and *The Realist*. But the nation's papers—usually tied to the day's news, sometimes anesthetized by a timidity that relegates satire to political cartoons or to the comic page—more and more play politics straight. Pogo, Li'l Abner and Peanuts often speak more eloquently than the editorials. "Editors," says Buchwald, "are afraid of humor, especially if it is home-grown and steps on some of their sacred local toes."

Art Buchwald is neither anesthetized

nor afraid, and this is one of the reasons his bite is so effective. With his indifferent clothes, his amiable panda face peering from behind thick, horn-rimmed glasses, a 6-inch Bering Coronet cigar in his mouth, he looks the part of the court jester. But for all the funnyman props, Buchwald is basically a serious person. "He is not apolitical," says columnist Robert Novak. "He feels very deeply about things." Buchwald himself says that he "wakes up mad," and that his columns are a way of expressing his anger. The anger seldom comes through but when it does it is unmistakable. Last year, his column about three men in a leaky boat—with Richard Nixon hiding food under his shirt and bailing water into the sinking craft—brought the cry of "unfair" from one of his bosses at The New York Herald Tribune.

The sugar-coating of humor on such bitter realities as nuclear weapons and the racial struggle often gets Buchwald's viewpoint across more effectively than direct editorial comment. In a city

awash with self-important journalists, hyperserious analysts and determined deep thinkers, his column is perhaps the most widely read of all. Three times a week, opposite the editorial page in The Washington Post, Buchwald serves his mockery to the breakfast tables of the Capital. As Bill Moyers says, he keeps the city "in touch with reality." Across the nation, editors who subscribe to the column happily agree. "His humor puts things in perspective," says Bill Baggs, editor of The Miami News.

New Beat: It wasn't always a laugh and a new client a day when Buchwald began his first Washington columns. After thirteen and a half years of syndication by the Herald Tribune from Paris, the columnist was appearing in 80 papers, a respectable but not spectacular showing. He had the cushiest newspaper job in Europe—a celebrity interviewing celebrities, clowning in gondolas in Venice and wryly cross-examining stars like Ingrid Bergman. But Buchwald tossed over both Paris and status to risk a new career. In going to Washington, rather than New York, he deliberately entered the uncertain field of political humor instead of the old celebrity beat. Some thought he would slip, and for a time he did, but in the last year the



Lippmann and Easter Bunny

THE ART OF ART

On President Goldwater: "Every once in a while, when I have nothing better to do, I wonder what the country would be like if Barry Goldwater had been elected ... Based on his campaign and his speeches, it is a frightening thing to imagine. The mind boggles when you think of it. For one thing, we would probably be bombing North Vietnam now ... Russia and France would call for a Geneva conference, but Goldwater would reject it ... he would recklessly announce he was sending in a battalion of Marines with Hawk missiles to protect our airfields ... the people who voted for Johnson would scream at their Republican friends, 'I told you if Goldwater became President he'd get us into a war' ... But fortunately, with President Johnson at the helm, we don't have to think about it."

On China: "There should be a third China set up somewhere—maybe in Liechtenstein or Switzerland—which would have nothing to do with the other two Chinas. This would be Neutralist China ... In this way, we wouldn't have to hurt anybody's feelings by choosing between Communist China and Nationalist

China ... we could choose two from column A rather than one from column B."

On President Johnson's News Conferences: "Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, I have a few announcements to make. My daughter Luci passed her algebra examination and Lynda Bird has been invited to a dance next week in Annapolis ... I am happy to report I am closing down the Post Office Department, which will save the American taxpayer \$235 million. I would like to read the census figures for 1964 ... If we have any time after that, I would be glad to answer any questions."

On How Hubert Humphrey Was Chosen: "One day, while he was eating lunch with Mrs. Johnson, she said to him, 'You know, Lyndon, we owe the Hubert Humphreys a dinner.' The President said, 'Ah don't have time to have dinner with the Humphreys, but Ah tell you what, Lady Bird, Ah'll make it up to them some way.'"

On Coming Home: "I was asked personally by Walter Lippmann, Arthur Krock and David Lawrence to come back and become the Dean of the Washington Press Corps. None of them wanted the title anymore, and they asked if I would head the thing up. It doesn't pay anything, of course, but I couldn't very well refuse a clear-cut mandate."

On Former Press Secretary James Hagerty's Briefings:

"Hagerty: The President went to bed at 11:06 tonight."

"Q. Jim, did the President speak to anyone before retiring?"

"A. He spoke to the Secretary of State."

"Q. What did he say to the Secretary of State, Jim?"

"A. He said: 'Good night, Foster.'"

On Grace Kelly's Wedding: "The Buchwalds and the Grimaldis [the Royal House of Monaco] have not spoken to each other since January 8, 1297 [when] Rainier I, then an admiral, decreed that only members of the Associated, United, and International Press ... could accompany him into battle."

Quoting Prof. Max Kilaton: "While Russian and American nuclear bombs are large enough, the targets for most of them are too small. We must build bigger targets ..."

Buchshot has been on target, sometimes hitting two out of three, week after week.

Buchwald's newspaper clients now number more than 230, from Helsinki to Karachi. His nearest rival, ironist Russell Baker, 39, who has been writing the Observer column for The New York Times since 1962, is offered to 150 papers by the Times syndicate. Buchwald also outpulls such sobersides as Joseph Alsop (225), and may soon even catch up with Lippmann at 300.

Indeed, Buchwald's satiric antennas have grown so acute lately that life in Washington now seems to imitate Art. "When the story of the Dominican Republic's revolution unfolds," he wrote recently, "you may hear about a great, unsung hero whose name is Sidney . . . an American tourist visiting Santo Domingo when the fighting broke out. As you may remember, President Johnson sent in Marines to protect Americans who could possibly be hurt. Unfortunately, the evacuation went off so fast that in 24 hours there wasn't an American left in the capital except Sidney. When Sidney showed up at the pier to be taken on board ship, he was stopped by a Marine colonel who said, 'I'm sorry, you can't leave, sir.'"

"Why not?" Sidney wanted to know.

"Because we've been sent here to protect Americans and you're the only American left. If you leave, we'll have to pull out'."

The day his Sidney column appeared, a friend in the State Department called and asked: "Have you been reading secret documents? We've been talking all week about the fact that we've been getting the Americans out of the Dominican Republic too fast."

The Real FBI: Bigger even than the Sidney exclusive was Buchwald's clean beat on the real reason President Johnson did not fire J. Edgar Hoover after the FBI director criticized Martin Luther King and the Warren report. "The reason is J. Edgar Hoover doesn't exist," disclosed Buchwald. "He is a mythical person first thought up by the Reader's Digest . . . What happened was that in 1925 the Reader's Digest was printing an article on the newly formed Federal Bureau of Investigation and as they do with so many pieces they signed it with a *nom de plume*. They got the word Hoover from the vacuum cleaner—to give the idea of cleanup. Edgar was the name of one of the publisher's nephews, and the J. stood for jail."

Buchwald is so enterprising he is fast becoming an enterprise himself. Besides writing his column three times a week, every other month he edifies housewives in the Ladies' Home Journal. He has cut his first recording—"Sex and the College Boy"—for Capitol Records, Inc.,

and is currently negotiating with the American Broadcasting Co. for a half-hour, prime-time weekly spoof of the news with cartoonist Al Capp. The title, depending on who is doing the talking, is The Capp-Buchwald Report or The Buchwald-Capp Report. ("Good-night, Al . . . Good-night, Art.")

Buchwald's Sidney fantasy has drawn two feelers from Hollywood and he is working on a new movie script for M-G-M. Recently, he signed a contract with television producer David L. Wolper to write an hour-long satiric special on Washington. With his friendly competitor, Russell Baker, he has written the outline for a Broadway musical about a Russian pop singer in the United States. David Merrick hopes to produce it with comedian Woody Allen as the rock 'n' roll Red.

Squeals: About every eighteen months his publishers assemble his columns into book form; currently Buchwald is promoting his tenth, a second collection of Washington columns entitled "... and Then I Told the President." His books regularly sell some 20,000 copies in hard-cover and between 100,000 and 150,000 in paperback. Going the stockyard meat packers one better, Buchwald even sells the squeals. Four times a month, peering over lecterns like a kindly delicatessen owner, he delivers lectures to clubs and colleges. Culled liberally from his columns, the talks come for \$1,500 apiece and are brimful of Inside Washington. ("The real reason President Johnson didn't send Vice President Humphrey to the Churchill funeral is that Humphrey can't look sad.") "I made \$155,000 last year," says Buchwald, "and I'm now negotiating a loan to pay the taxes. I remember walking past Cartier's with my wife and I said, 'Remember when I used to buy stuff there—when we were poor?'"

Comic relief was almost a necessity in Art Buchwald's early life. Born in New York, he and his three sisters lived in an orphanage and a series of four foster homes before finally coming to roost in Queens with their father, Joseph, a curtain manufacturer. By then, Buchwald was 16, an indifferent student. Out of the foster homes, the odd jobs, the schools and the city streets came a hard-eyed attitude. "The world may look all right to you, but it looks crazy to me," says Buchwald. "My book—I tell you, *my* book—is 'Catcher in the Rye'."

Ecumenical: With the impulsiveness of Holden Caulfield, Buchwald ran away from home when he was 16 and joined the Marines. Mustered out a sergeant in 1945, he managed to enroll as a freshman at the University of Southern California despite his lack of a high-school diploma. But college suited him little more than high school, and, in



Work of Art: Clowning in Venice . . .



. . . interviewing Bergman . . .



. . . with Secretary McNamara . . .



. . . and flying high with the Air Force



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1948, with a \$250 veteran's bonus from New York, Buchwald sailed for Paris.

He was a legman for Variety, then talked himself into a job on the Paris edition of the Tribune, and within a few years his gentle mocking of the international set was the talk of Europe. "Like everything else I've ever done, I was sort of a spectator," says Buchwald. "To me it was just a big joke." In Paris, Buchwald met Ann McGarry, a former fashion expert doing public-relations work for Pierre Balmain. After a three-year courtship, they were married in 1952 and have three adopted children born in three countries: Joel, 11 (Ireland); Connie, 10 (Spain) and

sured readers. "Long ago we paid attention to every third word in translating his sharp, entertaining columns into Russian and regularly transferred the symbolic words to another place, which of course misled the CIA agents."

Artful Day: Buchwald's day is unlike any other Washington newsman's. He arises grouchy at 7:30 a.m., in his \$150,000, five-bedroom house on Hawthorne Street in Wesley Heights, a fashionable section of Northwest Washington. By 8, he is sitting in the dining room staring at coffee, an English muffin and an egg. At 8:30, Buchwald dials an unlisted number for a Diamond Cab and reads The Washington Post during



Fred Ward—Black Star

Big Daddy and family: 'The original ecumenical man'

Jennifer, 8 (France). "Buchwald is the original ecumenical man," says a friend.

Like certain good wines, the Buchwald wit travels well. His columns, in part or in full, are quoted in many foreign magazines and newspapers. In the Soviet Union they have appeared in Pravda, Izvestia, Krokodil and Zarubezhom (Abroad)—and only partly because of his good-natured wiggling of American policy. Says Daniel F. Kraminov, Zarubezhom's good-humored editor: "Of course he's critical of American policies; but it's not only that. His brand of humor is very similar to our own."

Not long ago, Stuart Loory, the Tribune's Moscow correspondent, dispatched an open letter to Buchwald noting how popular he was in Russia but despairing of ever collecting any rubles for the columnist. "I'm not bothered about getting paid," replied Buchwald. "The CIA takes care of me. Every third word in my column is a code word for our agents in Moscow." Kraminov went right along with the gag. "Art Buchwald's confession did not surprise us," Zarubezhom as-

the twelve-minute drive to his downtown office on Pennsylvania Avenue. One of the few Americans in the world who does not know how to drive, Buchwald spends nearly \$800 a year on taxis.

At his desk, Buchwald scours both the Herald Tribune and The New York Times, clipping copiously. ("The most important element of my success as a reporter is that I don't talk to anybody.") His research done, the columnist wades into the morning mail, making sure that every fan letter gets a Buchwald reply. Nasty mail gets a simple: "I'm so glad you like the column." Shortly after 10, he begins prowling the halls. ("I leave my office because I can't stand the cigar smoke.") His first stop is usually across the corridor at the office of the tandem columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. The other day he poked his head in the door, found only Novak on duty and asked: "Are you giving Evans enough to do?"

After lunch with newspaper comrades or such friends as lawyer Edward Bennett Williams, Buchwald begins to think

about his column. Once he hits upon an idea he plunges ahead, banging out the 600 words on his office typewriter in an hour and a half. Although he then shows the manuscript to friends "for reaction," Buchwald rarely does any rewriting. This cavalier attitude occasionally results in sloppy syntax or grammar, but more frequently in a failure to throw out old chestnuts ("Congressman Michael O'Lobby from the State of Indignation").

By 3:30 p.m., Buchwald is on the lookout for a gin-rummy partner. His most frequent adversary is Harry (Doc) Dalinsky, a philosophical pharmacist from Georgetown who reminds the columnist of his father. Every fortnight he joins several of the boys—White House aide Jack Valenti, USIA director Carl T. Rowan, NBC's David Brinkley and Ambassador at Large Llewellyn Thompson, among others—at the poker table, where he is about \$200 ahead on the year's play. "He's impossible in victory and insufferable in defeat," says Valenti.

'My House': Like his column, Buchwald is basically simple and unpretentious. Though he has become one of the biggest celebrities in Washington in the last two and a half years, his life is centered around his family more and more. Buchwald once told a friend who asked what he was working for in life: "My house! It costs so much to run. So for the rest of my life I'm going to be working for it. Very few men know what they're working for. I know. I can see it every day."

What he sees is a great stone building set in the middle of three-quarters of an acre surrounded on three sides by a high wooden fence. Sundays the Buchwalds' oval swimming pool fills up with neighborhood kids as he oversees the fun from a director's chair labeled "Big Daddy." Last Easter, Buchwald gave a party for friends and their children and greeted all guests—Walter Lippmann among them—dressed in a rabbit suit. "He is the only man I know who could get away with that," says Brinkley.

But if Buchwald lives by his wit, so does most of Washington. Somewhat square, earnestly engaged in official shoptalk, the Capital needs Buchwald desperately. He is overjoyed to oblige. Recently he returned to Queens to give his standard \$1,500 lecture free to about 200 members of Temple Isaiah (two of his sisters are in the Sisterhood). While he was being introduced he hastily arranged a fistful of dog-eared, 3-by-5 note cards and then, jamming them into his pocket, bounced up the center aisle to the platform like a 13-year-old bound for his *bar mitzvah*. "Everyone thinks I have one of the best jobs in the world," he told the gathering. "But, if you look at it objectively and examine it from all sides, I do."

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